The Path of the Wanderer: Autobiographical Theory and the Personal Essay

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IN HIS NOVELLA, *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean describes a conversation with his father, who knows of Norman's desire to write.

"You like to tell true stories, don't you?" the father asks.

"Yes," Maclean answers.

"After you have finished your true stories sometime," his father suggests, "why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why."[1]

Maclean's novella is full of "stories" about his family. Easily autobiographical, they are short, self-contained explorations into his life and family that could also be seen as personal essays. Admitting that he didn't understand the people he loved in life, Maclean writes about not understanding and yet loving anyway. Ultimately he learns that his father was right when he said, "It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us." Through his writing, Maclean "reach[es] out to them."[2]

For many people, writing is trying to make sense of "those we live with and love and should know." It is reaching out for something intangible, elusive. It is this definition of writing as "reaching out" that draws me to the essay, with its roots in the French word *essayer:* to try, to experiment, to risk, even—as essayist Philip Lopate says—"to leap experimentally into the unknown."[3]

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1. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (New York: Pocket Books/Simon & Schuster, 1976), 113.

2. Ibid.

3. Philip Lopate, *Against Joie de Vivre* (New York: Poseiden Press, 1989), 76.

Like the personal essay, the autobiography is also a "search for one's inner standing. . . . [It is] a process . . . not simply [a] narrative of the voyage, but also the voyage itself [with its] sense of discovery."[4] Traditionally, the autobiography has been defined as a straightforward account of the life one has lived, with a definite beginning and a description of events that have occurred during that lifetime. A survey of critical autobiographical theory, however, shows that autobiography is much more than that, and is in fact very similar to the personal essay, despite the obvious difference in length.

In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place,* a collection of autobiographical essays, Terry Tempest Williams says she writes "to confront what [she] do[es] not know," "to create a path for [her]self."[5] This rationale transforms the traditional definition of autobiography into an unknown path that the writer takes in search of understanding. The autobiography of a life that is "understood from the outset," that begins with a completed outline allowing the autobiographer to merely "flesh out" the details, is considered by some theorists to be "a failure, [or] a partial failure at any rate."[6] This is because the boundaries are already set and the writer does not move beyond them in search of what remains to be discovered. In this regard, the autobiography and the essay are similar, both serving as a "leap into the unknown," an attempt to reach out toward an understanding of one's life and those who are a part of it.

In the many, many papers I wrote as an English major, I learned to start with an idea, a thesis, and support it with various examples from literature. In other words, I started with the answer and then defended it. In my experience with the personal essays I have undertaken, I found a wonderful freedom, a freedom to ramble through unformed thoughts and incomplete memories, a freedom to begin with an unformed but intriguing concept or memory and to allow the ideas to arise through the writing. And in looking for meaning to the often bewildering events of my life, I have found both understanding and healing in the journey. I am deeply sorry I didn't make the discovery until graduate school—a discovery that many students may not make at all—that writing isn't just a means to communicate ideas and to set forth theories; it can lead the writer to concepts that weren't even imagined at the outset of the assignment if he or she is willing to take risks. Writing can and does serve an important social function, but I believe its personal use is just as power-

4. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 182.

5. Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 4.

6. Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 11-12.

ful. Unfortunately, political, social, and academic purposes often take precedence over writing about one's self.

Williams's collection of essays, *Refuge,* has been widely praised for its cultural and environmental insights, and yet Williams acknowledges that, for her, writing is "an attempt to heal [her]self."[7] Another widely anthologized writer, Frank Conroy, published an autobiographical novel that I happened to find at a used bookstore one day. The novel, which reads very much like a collection of connected personal essays, is titled *Stop-Time,* Conroy says, because writing is the "one still point" in the midst of "the sloppiness of things." It is the act of stopping time long enough to figure things out, and through understanding to achieve some sense of acceptance and healing. Despite his trepidation in writing so personally about himself, he writes because of his "faith in the act of writing."[8] And likewise, so do we all.

In a lighter vein, Eloise Bell compares writing to unpacking in "Unpacking Interruptus" from her collection of essays, *Only When I Laugh.* Packing for a weekend, a week, a ten-day hike in the wilderness is a breeze, she says. But unpacking leaves one staring in bewilderment at a closet that doesn't have room for everything that was there before the trip. This, she informs us, is because "the real unpacking from a journey doesn't have to do with clothes, toiletries, and accumulated souvenirs. It has to do with experiences, insights, inner changes—what we went away hoping to see and do, what actually happened, [and] what we lost along the way."[9] Writing allows us a place to put things in order. The personal essay and the autobiography both offer us room to sort out our experiences, to examine the souvenirs of our journey, and to consider what is worth keeping and what is not.

Both essay and autobiography have deep roots in our literary heritage; the essay is generally attributed to Michel de Montaigne, the autobiography to St. Augustine. The personal essay, or more precisely the autobiographical personal essay, is, I believe, a fairly recent development, at least in the Mormon community. Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert's *A Believing People,* published in 1974, contains seven personal essays, although only one, Ed Geary's "Goodbye to Poplar Haven" is noticeably autobiographical. In fact, another essayist in the collection, Truman Madsen, says at one point, "To be autobiographical for a moment . . . ," showing that autobiography and personal essay are not synonymous for him.[10]

7. Williams, *Refuge*, 4.

8. Frank Conroy, *Stop-Time* (New York: Viking Press, 1967), ix-xi, 29.

9. Eloise Bell, *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 28-29

10. Truman Madsen, "Human Anguish and Divine Love, " in *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert, eds. (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1974), 161-168.

A Thoughtful Faith and *Personal Voices*, both LDS collections, contain a good many autobiographical essays, but also some that are more theological and philosophical explorations.

In these collections are two of my favorite essays: one leans toward the autobiographical personal essay, the other leans more toward the theological/philosophical personal essay. In Bruce Young's essay, "The Miracle of Faith, The Miracle of Love: Some Personal Reflections" (in *A Thoughtful Faith)*, Dr. Young describes his experience meeting his wife-to-be, Margaret, and learning to love her and to see himself as lovable.[11] Richard Poll, the author of "What the Church Means to People Like Me" (in *Personal Voices)*, uses his essay to describe two different kinds of church members, both intelligent, spiritual, and loyal, who have a contribution to make to the church though in, at times, almost contradictory ways.[12] As Dr. Poll tells me what the church means to "people like [him]," he does include some personal narrative, but his essay is noticeably more philosophical than autobiographical.

Eugene England, considered by many to be the "father of the Mormon personal essay," has probably had a broader impact with his essays than any other Mormon writer. Many of his essays are clearly theological discussions, which the titles themselves often make clear; although not autobiographical, they may contain brief but powerful passages of personal narrative. Other essays, like "Monte Cristo" and "Jacaranda," appear to be autobiographical narrative for the most part.[13]

Before enrolling in Professor England's LDS literature class, I had little exposure to the personal essay. The class was invited to write a personal essay as one of our assignments, and as I tested out this unfamiliar style of writing, I was amazed at its power to transform ugliness and chaos into grace and beauty. I was also surprised at the things, somehow appearing on the paper, that I hadn't planned to write. For my essay, I began with a short narrative I had written earlier in a personal history class. The episode dealt with my mother's shopping sprees to Deseret Industries for dolls when I was a girl. I didn't expect to conclude that my mother was talented and caring, but so divided in her loyalties that she expended all her love and energy on boxes of old, second-hand dolls. When the essay was later published, the editor assigned to me asked how my family felt about my writing, then quickly added, "Or don't

11. Bruce Young, "The Miracle of Faith, The Miracle of Love: Some Personal Reflections," *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, Philip L. Barlowe, ed. (Centerville, Utah: Cannon Press, 1986), 259-276.

12. Richard Poll, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," *Personal Voices: A Celebration of Dialogue* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 167-178.

13. *Wasatch Review International* (June 1993): 84-102; see also *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995),107-130, 203-222.

they read your essays?" implying, I believe, that I would likely not show my essays to protect my family from embarrassment or hurt.

Yes, my family has read my essays. One very personal essay caused some pain, which seems to have softened over the years. But that first essay had a fairly immediate, miraculous effect on my mother, who saw herself, perhaps for the first time, as too talented and too loving, rather than what she had always believed: that she wasn't enough of anything. And I believe the rest of my family felt closer to my mother after reading that essay.

Shortly after I discovered the personal essay, I was introduced to autobiographical theory. Again and again I found striking similarities between the two forms of self-writing. I learned that the personal essay allowed me to make certain discoveries and to create meaning, and that in my attempts at autobiography, it was acceptable to learn about my life as I wrote, that in telling about a life, I would find it "at once a discovery [and] a creation."[14]

I learned, too, that I was creating a different self within my essays. Autobiography and essay have both a narrator and an author, ostensibly the same person, but although a relationship exists between the two, they are not the same person. "In the act of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another person, another world, and surely it is not the same, in any real sense, as that past world that does not, under any circumstances, nor however much we may wish it, now exist."[15] When we write about our lives, we create a new order to the pattern of our experiences; we create a new person as well. This is because we are not only the person who lived them, we are now the person who is writing about them, "and surely it is not the same."[16]

Another autobiographer, Mary McCarthy, notes this strange relationship between describing one's self and creating this self in the process of writing: "I suppose everyone continues to be interested in the quest for the self, but what you feel when you're older, I think, is . . . that you really must make the self. It's absolutely useless to look for it; you won't find it."[17]

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14. James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical,* James Olney, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 19.

15. Olney, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical,* 241.

16. Ibid.

17. Mary McCarthy, quoted in Elisabeth Niebuhr, "Interview with Mary McCarthy," *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews,* 2nd series, George Plimpton, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1968), 314.

It is strangely comforting to create a new persona, one who is wiser and stronger than we were or one who will ultimately be able to make sense of her experiences. When I wrote "Companionship," an essay about my mission, I could, for the first time, feel compassion for the missionary narrator I created. She was so young and naive going into her mission, pumped full of enormous expectations about herself and others. I didn't create her on purpose, nor did I write that essay to tell about my mission; I was simply responding to a writing assignment to tell about an exotic place I'd been. The only place I could think of was France, although the culture really hadn't seemed so very foreign to me. (It was the mission that brought on culture shock!) I learned to care for and to forgive this fragile young missionary in my essay in a way that I had not learned to forgive myself. In this way, I discovered that writing provided a way for me "to redeem" the past, which autobiographical theorists call "the prime motive—perhaps, indeed, the only real motive of the autobiographer."[18] Through writing, we have the chance to "win back what has been lost."[19]

I believe writers often write to put things in place, a process the autobiographer explains in this way: "In recounting my history I take the longest path, but this path that goes round my life leads me the more surely from me to myself. . . . It is the law of gathering in and of understanding acts that have been [mine] and all the faces and all the places where [I] have recognized signs and witness of [my] destiny.[20]

Like Norman Maclean, who writes about his family and his life in order to better understand them, essayist Mary Bradford experiences writing as the "search for authenticity and wholeness, . . . the desire to reach out without striking out."[21] Alfred Kazin writes "to make a home for himself, on paper,"[22] and Joan Didion writes "to find out what [she's] thinking.[23]

When we write we gain "by the very act of seeking, that order that [we] would have,"[24] a pattern-making which is echoed by Richard Selzer. A surgeon-essayist, Selzer turns to writing after long days in the operating room. After all, he writes, "surgery and writing are more alike

18. Olney, "Some Versions of Memory," 241.

19. Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, 39.

20. Ibid., 38.

21. Mary L. Bradford, "I, Eye, Aye: A Personal Essay on Personal Essays," *Personal Voices: A Celebration of Dialogue* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 11.

22. Alfred Kazin, "The Self as History: Reflections on Autobiography," *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, Marc Pachter, ed. (Washington, D.C: New Republic Books, 1979), 88.

23. Joan Didion, "While I Write," *The Dolphin Reader*, Douglas Hunt, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986), 1016.

24. James Olney, *Metaphors of Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 4.

than they are different. In surgery, it is the body that is being opened up and put back together for repairs. In writing, it is the whole world that is taken in for repairs, then put back in working order, piece by piece."[25]

I believe it is significant that more than one prophet of God has told us to write our life stories, our personal histories, or in other words, our autobiographies. As I've read the autobiographical writings of Ellis Shipp, of Mary Goble Pay, and others, particularly from the early days of the church, I feel blessed and thankful for these women and others like them. Even though I respect a writer whose imagination and sensitivity can create a story about suffering, about loss, about self-discovery, there is a certain power in sharing certain personal experiences and discoveries, either as the reader or the writer.

Autobiographical writing does have certain limitations. Despite any claim to be a true and accurate record of a life, an autobiography simply cannot be true. No autobiography can tell the "whole truth and nothing but the truth," and any attempt to include every detail, every thought, every moment would result in an encyclopedic effort, even if it were possible to remember and record all events accurately. And yet, forgetting to include one or two important details could produce an entirely different account from one written with the inclusion of those details.

Another criticism, and a legitimate one, is that any attempt at a true record is subject to "memory and introspection and even *imagination,*" and as such, autobiography "is often unreliable as a record of facts."[26] It is always interesting to compare my sister's memories of certain events with my own. They seldom match, but my sister, an enthusiastic and vibrant storyteller, defends herself by claiming she just "remembers bigger."

Since an accurate and truthful retelling of one's life is so fraught with likely missteps, the goal of autobiographical writing becomes "truth-seeking," rather than "truth-telling." The autobiographical personal essay invites writers to use fictional techniques to enhance their experiences when the bare facts, even if they could be remembered accurately, would not lead the reader to live the experience as the essayist did. For me, the essay calls for every skill the writer possesses—careful crafting of events and their settings, rich characterization, tight plotting, realistic dialogue—as well as courage and honesty. The result is that "the autobiographer half discovers, half creates a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever make claim to."[27]

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25. Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 9.

26. Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Lincolnwood, Ill: National Textbook Co., 1991), 17.

27. Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, 11.

Essayist Philip Lopate says of the essay that it "liberates the writer . . . and allows one to ramble in a way that more truly reflects the mind at work."[28] But the essay must be more than simply impromptu stream of conscious journal writing. It demands the same careful attention to detail and audience as do other literary efforts.

I believe the unique strength of such writing—including biography, family, and even church history—is that these are all powerful "forms of spiritual autobiography" that can enrich our lives.[29] Watching his father-preacher, David Bradley observed, "In confessing his own weakness my father . . . found access to a hidden source of power inside, or perhaps outside, himself. In any case it was a source of power that was magical and mystical."[30] Bradley says further that before he began writing, he had thought, "The writer's goal was to reveal truths in words manipulated so effectively as to cause movement in the minds and hearts of those who read them." In a powerful conclusion, he admits: "What I hadn't understood was that it would cost anything. I thought I could do those things while remaining safe and secure in myself."[31]

It is this "cost" that makes the personal essay one of our most demanding literary forms and, ultimately, one of the most rewarding for both writer and reader. To reveal our longings for wholeness, our lack of understanding, our pain in the face of injustice—this vulnerability gives birth to the power to redeem, which gives the autobiographical personal essay its power. This kind of power is nearly palpable in numerous personal essays that I could mention, among them Steve Walker's "Like There's No Tomorrow" and Carole Coombs Hanson's "The Death of a Son."[32] It is the courage to be vulnerable that will make the personal essay, as Gene England has said, the "most important contribution [of LDS writers] to the wider world literary culture."

The essay also has the power of directness, says another essayist, Clifton Jolley. He goes on to say that this power makes up for what it may lack of the "formal elegance of poetry" and "the rich textual elements of fiction."[33] But I disagree with him here. Many personal essays I have read are as "rich" in "textual elements" as the best of fiction. Like a

28. Philip Lopate, 75.

29. Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1974), 9.

30. David Bradley, "Bringing Down the Fire," *Spiritual Quests: The Art of Religious Writing*, William Zinsser, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988), 78.

31. Ibid., 78-79.

32. Steven Walker, "Like There's No Tomorrow," *Personal Voices: A Celebration of Dialogue* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature, 1987), 167-78, and Carole Coombs Hansen, "The Death of a Son," *Personal Voices*, 41-48.

33. Clifton Jolley, "Mormons and the Beast: In Defense of the Personal Essay," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 137-39.

poem or short story, the very brevity of the form requires careful craftsmanship.

For me, the essay has been an exercise in faith, in charity, and in understanding, as well as language. I can see greater meaning in the at-times bewildering events in my life—even if I am the one who creates the meaning and puts it there. As I have shared my life and my search with others, I have also received invitations to accompany others along their paths, to share their wanderings and to feel their wonder as we discover meaning in the world around us.

"The only important part of life," says one writer, "is the regathering. When everyone understands this . . . , everyone will write. . . . Each [of us] will read [ourselves]. And [our] own life will become more clear."[34]

34. Italo Svevo, quoted in Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography*, 4.